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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: A FULLER PICTURE OF THE FEBRUARY 2009  
BAUCHI SECTARIAN VIOLENCE

REF: ABUJA 332

**¶1.** (SBU) SUMMARY. Poloff, PolAssist and a delegation from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) traveled to Bauchi March 30 to April 1 to gain a better understanding of the February 21-22 sectarian violence in the state. The team met with State government officials, religious leaders, and non-governmental organizations. While the spark that ignited the Bauchi violence appears to have been a parking dispute, large numbers of unemployed, violent youth took advantage of the spark to loot and burn. By the end of the two-day crisis, as many as 12 people were killed and approximately 150 homes and businesses burned, with an estimated 85% of these belonging to Christians. Many with whom we met believed the crisis in Bauchi could have been stopped earlier; however, in response to the negative outcry following the Jos orders to "shoot on sight," the Bauchi governor initially ordered the police and security services not to fire their guns, thereby hamstringing efforts to bring the situation under control. It appears most of the violence was driven by youth gangs called "Sara Suka." These young, Hausa-Fulani gangs are at times employed by politicians (although there is no evidence that the February violence was directed by politicians) and are often under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol. The limiting factor in the February violence appears to have been personal relationships previously established with members of the other faith. Such relationships, however, are the exception rather than the norm, with even the interfaith NGOs we met never having actually met with each other previously. The key to preventing future conflicts is in grassroots efforts focused on building such personal relationships through interfaith councils and dialogue programs. Unfortunately, with poverty and unemployment fueling religious tensions, the crisis was not the first in Bauchi and almost certainly will not be the last. END SUMMARY.

**¶2.** (SBU) PolOff and PolAssist traveled with a USCIRF staff delegation to Bauchi State in northern Nigeria from March 30 - April 1 to discuss the February 21-22 sectarian violence in Bauchi (reftel), and get some sense of its root causes. The team met with representatives of the Bauchi State government, State Committee on Conflict Resolution and Community Reconciliation, State Shari'a Commission, Nigerian Red Cross, Roman Catholic Diocese of Bauchi, Bauchi State chapter of the

Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Evangelical Church of West Africa, and nongovernmental organizations working in interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution, as well as with several victims of the crisis and the Bauchi Chief Imam. Sectarian crises are not new to Bauchi -- as many as 52 churches were burned in Tafawa Balewa in 2002 according to the Catholic Diocese and six churches were destroyed in 2008 in Ningi following the rescue of two Christian women reportedly kidnapped for forced marriage to Muslim grooms. While opinions differed on some details of the February 2009 violence, a clearer picture emerged of the events leading up to and during the crisis and of the underlying causes of conflict in the state. Common themes included the role of poverty and unemployment in local ethnic and sectarian conflict and the lack of engagement by the State government in significant efforts to prevent future violence.

#### DETAILS OF THE FEB CRISIS - CHAIN OF EVENTS

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¶3. (SBU) Piecing together information from all these meetings, the following picture emerged. On February 13, security at the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) church in "Railway" Local Government Area (LGA) blocked Muslim worshippers from the mosque down the street from parking in the church's parking lot. An argument ensued. The Catholic Diocese reported that the police and State Security Service (SSS) were called in and the situation calmed down. Reportedly, leaders from the COCIN church, the mosque, CAN, the police and SSS met two times that next week to discuss the parking dispute and believed they had resolved the situation. (Note: We were told by the Catholic Diocese that

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Imam Fantami Isa, who preached at the mosque, had been previously thrown out of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University and of a Gombe mosque for preaching inflammatory rhetoric. End Note.) Also on February 13, a church burned in the Kafadumi local government area (LGA), apparently caused by electrical problems. Three nights later (February 16), a mosque reportedly caught fire. (Note: We never heard any explanations of the reason for the mosque fire.)

¶4. (SBU) On Friday, February 20, when attendees returned to the mosque for prayers, the parking problem recurred. At that point, most with whom we spoke seemed to agree that gangs of young (generally 17-19 years old), unemployed Hausa men known locally as "Sara Suka" joined in and escalated the argument to violence. (Note: The name is Hausa for "slash and stab." While the Sara Suka gangs are mostly Hausa-Fulani Muslims, they are generally not regular attendees at mosque, nor are they believed to be organized for religious purposes. Several observers commented that many of them are drug addicts or use alcohol. End note.) The COCIN church was burned and police again came into the area to restore order. That night, the mosque was burned as well. During the day on Saturday, February 21, violence continued throughout the Railway LGA area.

¶5. (SBU) Most with whom we spoke said the police and security services could have stopped the violence at this stage if they had acted. We were told by the Bauchi State government Special Advisor on Peace and Conflict Resolution, however, that, following the outcry over the "shoot on sight" order given in Jos in November, Bauchi Governor Yuguda had given explicit instructions to the police and security services not to fire their weapons. As a result, no action was taken to stop the violence until late on February 20 when the Governor reversed this order. In all, the worst part of the violence appears to have lasted only a few hours. In this time, 11-12 people were killed (we heard both numbers repeatedly) and approximately 150 homes and businesses were burned. The Red Cross estimated 85% of the damage was to Christian homes and businesses. The Red Cross reported as many as 7,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) immediately following the crisis. That number had dropped to just over 300 by late March. (Note: Some of those still in the IDP camps include

members of the Sayawa tribe who were displaced in the 2008 violence in Tafawa Balewa.)

#### WHO PERPETRATED THE VIOLENCE

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16. (SBU) Numerous contacts told us that the violence was almost exclusively perpetrated by the Sara Suka gangs. The Red Cross and the Catholic Diocese both told us these gangs are often hired by politicians to follow the politicians' cars, singing praises or causing trouble to those who get in the way. The Red Cross told us that several of these boys were arrested following the violence; however, the politicians demanded the release of "their boys" and over a short period of time virtually all of them were released. Despite the clear ties to politicians, we heard no allegations that the politicians had incited or in any way called for the February violence. As well, many with whom we spoke recognized that the Sara Suka members were neither controlled by the Muslim nor the Christian communities. While it is likely the violence was mainly carried out by Sara Suka members, there appears to have been some collusion or support from local community members in the burning of homes and businesses as someone from the local area would have been needed to point out which homes were Christian and which were Muslim.

17. (SBU) The team noted several stories of heroes who reached out and sheltered or defended their neighbors of different faith. We heard of a church that was not burned because the Imam from the mosque across the street came to stand and defend it, and we heard of Christians and Muslims who sheltered neighbors and even strangers. Several of the interfaith NGO representatives noted that thousands sought

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refuge in the military barracks during the crisis, including Muslims and Christians, men, women and children. All these people were there together, but there were no incidents of violence among them at the Barracks. The NGOs also noted the example of Zongo LGA, an LGA bordering Railway with approximately equal numbers of Christians and Muslims. The LGA Chairman in Zongo set up neighborhood committees to resolve conflicts, foster a sense of community and protect community interests. When the violence threatened to spread to Zongo, community members (Muslim and Christian) reportedly blocked the road and would not allow the rioting mob to enter the area.

#### ROOT CAUSES AND STATE RESPONSE

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18. (SBU) While the initial spark for the violence appears to have been a parking dispute, the size of the reaction to this initial event clearly reflected a pre-existing tense situation. Religious differences and, in particular, a sense of majority rule which seems to leave minority Christians feeling unrepresented and outside the system, seem to have certainly played a role. As well, high unemployment, lack of development, public corruption, lack of training and skills among the police and security services, and lack of a strong state government response all played a significant role. Cellular phones allowed word of the violence to spread quickly, as news of the violence and calls for retribution were sent out by text message. Even the weather seemed to play its part -- in the hot, dry weather before the beginning of the rainy season, tempers are often short, and many in the largely agrarian society are idle. It was clear from the positive stories of local heroes that what made the difference in limiting the spread of violence in many cases was the personal relationships previously established with members of the other faith. It was equally clear, however, that such relationships are the exception rather than the rule; for example, the "interfaith" mediation NGOs with whom we met had never actually met with each other. There was continuous debate in almost every meeting we had on whether the root cause of the violence was religious, political or ethnic. While some were adamant that it was purely one or

another, most believed that it was a murky combination of the three that was impossible for them to parse out.

¶9. (SBU) Salisu Shehu, Bauchi State Special Advisor on Education and Societal Reorientation and Liman Babayo, Special Assistant on Peace and Conflict Resolution, told the team that the State Elders Committee, and the Committee on Conflict Resolution and Community Reconciliation are working to prevent future violence. The Committee on Conflict Resolution maintained it has been "highly successful," noting that Muslim and Christian committee members sit next to each other. Shehu outlined the Bauchi State government's efforts to mediate tension and prevent violence, including establishing 20 peace centers around the state, placing 45 "peace agents" in local communities to gather information and report to the security services, and delivering peace lectures in primary and secondary schools.

COMMENT

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¶10. (SBU) Without significant improvements to the economy and development in Bauchi, there will continue to be a risk of future periodic outbreaks of violence in the area. Given Nigeria's declining oil revenues (the source of virtually all government funds) and the resultant decreases in the state's budget, the Bauchi State government's ability to deliver basic services and promote employment and development among its people will continue to be limited, at least in the near term. We encountered a strong sense from the Christian community that this was a "war" and that the time had come to "stand up and defend ourselves" which also does not bode well for peace. The key to preventing future crises is more likely to be at grassroots level rather than at broader policy levels. Expansion of interfaith councils and dialogue programs from the national to the state and local levels

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would allow an avenue for building such relationships. End comment.

¶11. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.  
SANDERS